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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

Intelligence
Note - 208

March 24, 1969

To : The Secretary
Through : S/S
From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes *tlh*
Subject : US-USSR: Soviet Public Reaction to the US Sentinel Decision

The Soviets were slow to give an authoritative reaction to the decision announced by the President on March 14. This finally appeared in the March 20 issue of Pravda, the first editorial comment on the event produced by either of the two main Soviet newspapers. Pravda shunned criticism of the President and avoided the question of the utility of strategic arms talks with the US in the light of the ABM decision. It seems unlikely that Soviet propaganda will shift significantly from this tack for the near future. However, increased emphasis in US media or pronouncements on either the menacing nature of Soviet strategy or the alleged weakness of the USSR as motivating their desire for strategic weapons discussions with the US might bring a change in their line.

Veiled Soviet Warnings against a US Move Evaporate. Soviet propaganda treatment of the impending US decision before the President's press conference stressed the economic troubles which a decision to proceed with an ABM system would supposedly bring the US. On the eve of the conference Izvestiya commentator Matveyev climaxed the Soviet media campaign with a long piece portraying a US ABM system as bringing untold misery to the American poor and great dangers of accident for the population. He also implied that it might jeopardize strategic arms talks because it would be a step which could place one side at a disadvantage.

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Once the US decision had been announced, the first Soviet reactions, by TASS and Moscow radio, attacked the US move as a concession to monopolists and as deceitfully based on a false claim of a Soviet threat to the US. In noting a "fierce struggle" within the US government and the American population at large over the ABM issue, and by making no reference to possible strategic arms talks, they left the impression that the Sentinel question was a US internal matter.

The Pravda article of March 20 was similar, in that it placed the blame on the "industrial-military complex" rather than on the President and avoided any implication that the ABM decision might affect strategic weapons talks. Pravda warned that US monopolists were striving to unleash a new round in the arms race, which constituted a "dangerous trend," but it otherwise treated the decision as a US domestic question.

Soviet media coverage of the ABM question subsequent to the March 20 Pravda article has continued to be limited and noncommittal, with no reference to the details on Soviet capabilities which have featured the dispute in the United States. Domestic broadcasts have reported factually on the opposition to the ABM from some sectors of American public opinion, with particular reference to the views of influential journalists and Senators. In its broadcast commentaries to North America, on the other hand, Moscow radio has adopted a polemical "feed-back" approach which utilizes the arguments of the same US critics in order to criticize the President by name for his ABM decision. A Vladimir Kosyakov commentary of March 21 said that President

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Nixon is following in the footsteps of the Johnson Administration and launching another round of military preparations. Moscow radio broadcasts for the American audience also inveigh against the "military-industrial interests" who are allegedly seeking to make profits from war production when the people of the United States need those same funds to cope with the crisis in the cities.

Kosygin Sets the Tone. Kosygin's message of March 18 to the resumed Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee in Geneva omitted any reference to US-Soviet discussions on strategic weapons and placed strategic arms limitation rather low down in priority among the arms control measures mentioned as of longstanding interest to the USSR. While a message to the ENDC would not have been an appropriate vehicle, in Moscow's view, for reiterating Soviet interest in talks with the US, the low-key treatment of strategic arms in Kosygin's telegram is probably indicative of Soviet discomfort over recent US press play on this issue. The Soviets may feel that the US lately has been taking advantage of Moscow readiness to wait several months for a US response -- forgetting the extended period during which the Soviet Union left a US proposal unanswered. Moscow's awkward position was not eased by the fact that Polish and Yugoslav media highlighted the US ABM decision as requiring a Soviet countermove and placing in question the USSR's readiness to proceed with strategic arms talks.

Nevertheless, it seems likely that Soviet public treatment of disarmament matters will for the near future continue to handle the question of

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strategic weapons somewhat routinely and possibly avoid mention of talks with the US. This could change, however, if such developments as Congressional hearings in Washington and the general controversy in the US over the safeguard program should keep world attention focused on this question together with the absence of a tough Soviet reaction.

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